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## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC.\*

BY HORATIO PARKER.

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A FAMOUS orchestral conductor once told me that he was glad he should be dead in fifty years, so that he should not have to hear the music of that time. It is needless to say that he was conservative, but it should be stated that he was and is one of the best-known and most efficient conductors we ever have had in this country. Although his remark is typical of the critical attitude of many who have to do with new music, yet it does not in the least represent the attitude of the public, which is interested and pleased as never before with the music of our own time. There have always been people to declare that the particular art in which they were interested, at the particular time in which they lived, was going to the dogs. And there seem to be peculiar excuses for this belief in music-lovers just now. But there ought to be some way of reconciling the pessimism of the critics and the optimism of the public which finds eloquent expression in the buying of many tickets. By critics I do not mean merely the journalists. These have been so often so rudely shocked that they not only fear to tread, but fail to rush in, and at a first hearing of new things are fain to give forth an uncertain sound which may be taken for approval or the reverse in the light of subsequent developments.

The pursuit and enjoyment of music call for the exercise, on the part of its devotees, of three principal functions widely different. These are the functions of the composer, the performer and the listener.

The composer is the source and motive power of all art music, the producer, who draws his inspiration from the recesses of his inner artistic consciousness, whose desire and aim is to realize

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as well as possible the ideals with which his brain is filled. He seeks to give expression to musical ideas which shall call forth sympathetic feeling in those to whom the utterance is addressed. Although in some cases it is apparently meant for an ideal audience which has as yet no existence, yet if the utterance be true and skilfully made it will in no case fail of audience or of effect even though the time be delayed.

The second function necessary to the practice of music is that of the performer or reproducer. This activity is closely allied to the first, which is in truth dependent upon it. It is of high importance, and in ideal instances may be artistic activity of a kind hardly lower than that of the composer, but it is quite different in character. This also is at root, a manifestation of a desire for utterance, of the craving to awaken sympathetic feeling in others; but it is different in that it seeks and gives expression to ideas which are already in existence. The composer seeks those which do not as yet exist. The performer gives utterance to the thought of another, the composer to his own. But the work of the performer is the only actual embodiment for most people of the results of the first function, and he frequently clarifies and enhances the composer's work in a measure beyond expectation. It calls for self-control as well as for self-abandonment, for sympathy in the highest degree and a twofold sympathy—with the composer and with the audience; and for personal magnetic power to such an extent that it is no wonder, but perfectly natural, that people should frequently, even usually, lose all sight and sense of the composer or producer, who is remote from them, in admiring the work of the reproducing artist who is always near to them.

The third function is equally important with the other two, but more different from them than they are from each other. It is that of the audience or listeners. This function is largely misunderstood and usually undervalued. It is the exact opposite of the other two essentials of music-making in that it calls for receptive activity, if one may so express it, for intelligent, passive sympathy. This sympathy of the audience is the mark at which both composer and performer are aiming. It has no public or open reward, but well deserves one. Audiences certainly should receive credit for a good bit of intelligent listening, but it is hard to know just how or when to give it. The quality of sym-

pathy is intangible and difficult to appreciate. To most audiences it seems unimportant whether it be given or withheld except in so far as they applaud or not. And it is often hard to identify or recognize. It is quite impossible to know whether a smooth, impassive, self-restrained Anglo-Saxon face hides the warmest appreciation or the densest ignorance or indifference. They frequently look just alike. Nor can one ever tell whether the heightened color and brightened eyes are caused by the long hair and hands of the performer or by beautiful music. A particularly good luncheon or dinner preceding the concert might have the same outward effect. So the successful listener is a mystery in some degree, but a pleasing and very necessary one. His work is as important as that of the composer or performer, and his rewards are none the less real because they are not counted out to him in cash, because he pays and does not receive a tangible medium of exchange. They lie in the doing of the thing and in the conscious self-improvement which is the result of his effort.

In speaking of modern music we can omit personalities concerning classical composers. Their works fall entirely to the exercises of the second and third functions mentioned; but since the bulk of contemporary music is by classical composers, it may be well to speak briefly of the attitude of performers and audiences toward music of this kind. In an ideal world the performer and the listener would have the same kind and degree of pleasure in music except in so far as it is more blessed to give than to receive. It may be laid down as a general principle that performers of classical music have more enjoyment than listeners. Palestrina is a pre-classical composer with distinct limitations, and it is quite reasonable that he should appeal under ordinary conditions to a small audience, and to that imperfectly. He is a religious composer, and most audiences prefer to keep their religious feelings for Sunday use. He is a composer of church music to be sung in church, so that his work must miss its effect in a modern concert-room. We have very few churches in our country fit for the performance of Palestrina's music. I know a jail or two where it would sound wonderfully effective, but there are obvious reasons for not going so far in the pursuit of art as this remark suggests. It follows, therefore, that Palestrina in a concert-room is enjoyed by the average listener only by means of a lively exercise of the imagination with frequent, perhaps un-

conscious mental reference to what he has read or heard about it. If there is enthusiasm it is surely for the performers, because the music itself is so clear, so pure, so absolutely impersonal, that it is hardly reasonable to expect it to appeal to the listener of to-day. He is too remote from it and should not think less of himself because he does not feel an immediate response. In proper circumstances, in a real church, he would surely respond at once. For this music is the summit of a great wave of musical development. Nothing exists of earlier or later date which may be compared with it. It is ideal church music, ideal religious music; the greatest and purest ever made; and it can never be surpassed, for we have gone by the point in the history of the art at which such effort as Palestrina's can bring forth such fruit.

The public attitude toward Bach is much more natural and unconstrained. He is nearer to us, and is an instrumental composer. Although in somewhat archaic terms, his music is personal expression in a much higher degree than that of the absolutely impersonal Palestrina. Then the vigor, the life and animation which inform the whole texture of his work are so obvious that we cannot miss them. And, again, in his greatest work the feeling of design is so clear, the upbuilding and the resulting massiveness are so faultless, that the devout and habitual lover of music has the reposeful and at the same time exciting conviction that it is the inevitable which is being heard. Enjoyment is easy even to the unlearned. In those works which are less massive than the greatest the pleasure we have from Bach is more subtle, more refined and perhaps less acute, but we always feel that we listen to a master. Bach gives, perhaps, the highest satisfaction in his chamber-music. Much of his work is so very intimate that we find the balance of expression and form most easily when we are near enough to hear every note. The church cantatas in church, the great organ works in a comparatively small place, or the orchestral music in a hall of moderate size are among the keenest enjoyments for performers and audience. Applause, if it is given, must be for the performers or for their work. The compositions are above approval. It is like speaking well of the Bible to praise them.

In the work of his contemporary, Handel, whose texture is less purely polyphonic and instrumental, the enjoyments of performer and listener come nearer to a point of coincidence. The audi-

ence can love it more nearly as a performer does. We feel that the vitality in Handel is of a more human kind; that it is nearer our level, less supernal; but it is convincing and satisfying even when most popular, and is not disappointing upon intimate acquaintance, even though it lack the nearly superhuman fluidity and the marvellous texture of Bach.

The music of Beethoven is so well known, so frequently heard and so clearly understood that we may take it for granted and go on to music which is modern in every sense; made in our own time and addressed to our own personal feelings. Our present-day music is twofold in character, a direct result of the labors of Beethoven and his successor in pure music, and of Wagner and the romanticists in music which is not absolute. The symphony or sonata form is now archaic in the same sense that the fugue is archaic. Beautiful music may be, will be made in both forms, but that is no longer the general problem.

It is probably true that since the four symphonies of Brahms, no symphonic works carry the conviction of the symphonic poems of Richard Strauss. Although these are cast in a modification of the symphonic form of Beethoven, they always have a psychological basis or original impulse outside of music. They are intended to characterize in musical speech or language things which can only by vigorous effort be brought into any connection with music itself. The question naturally arises, Has the power of making absolute music entirely disappeared? I am loath to think so, but surely the practice has dwindled in importance.

We need not be concerned to examine these extra musical bases. Granting them to be necessary, one is much as another. But that is just what many are reluctant to grant. Many are brazen enough to enjoy programme music frequently in spite of, not on account of, the programme; and some people prefer the advertisements which are usually in larger print. Both save thinking. But what most critics object to is not the underlying programme. The commonest criticisms which we hear of strictly modern music charge it with a lack of economy, amounting to constant extravagance, a lack of reserve, amounting almost to shamelessness, and a degree of complexity entirely incomprehensible to the average listener, and, if we are to believe careful critics, out of all proportion to the results attained. Of course economy is a great and essential virtue in art, but it is not incompatible with

large expenditures. It depends on the size of the fund which is being drawn upon. Nor is explicit and forceful utterance incompatible with reserve. As for complexity, it may sometimes be beyond the power of any listener to appreciate. Perhaps only the composer and the conductor can see all the subtleties in an orchestral score. But is such complexity a waste? Not necessarily, for good work is never wasted. Although beauties in a viola part or in the second bassoon may not be obvious to the casual listener, however hard he may listen, they are not necessarily futile. They may, perhaps, be noticed only by the composer, the conductor and the individual performer, but they are there and they constitute a claim on the respect and affection of future musicians. If the hidden ones were the only beauties they would be useless, but as gratuitous additional graces they call for approbation. But one may not admire complexity for its own sake. It is far easier than forceful simplicity.

At a recent performance of a modern symphonic work which occupied an entire concert and called for nearly all possible familiar musical resources, I recall wondering whether or not it is a bad sign that a composer gets respectful hearing for pretentious trivialities and vulgarities uttered at the top of the many times re-enforced brazen lungs of an immense orchestra. There were a few minutes of exquisite beauty after more than an hour of what seemed an arid waste of dust and dullness. Meanwhile there were long crescendos with new and cruel percussion instruments working industriously ever louder and faster, but leading up time after time to an absolute musical vacuum. One's hopes were raised to the highest point of expectation, but it is not enough merely to raise such hopes. They should be satisfied as well.

It is such unsatisfying work as this which calls forth pessimistic forebodings as to the future of music as an independent art. Serious critics and essayists have made vigorous attempts to oust the music of the future from separate existence and to relegate it to the position of a human language which is to be used, when it is quite grown up to express, more or less pictorially, ordinary or extraordinary human happenings or emotions. And there have not been wanting composers to support this hopeless view. The application of pure reason to such emotional phenomena as our pleasure in music results occasionally in

something very like nonsense. The arts have different media of expression, but excepting the arts of poetry and literature the medium is no spoken or written language. Indeed, artists are apt to regard with some degree of suspicion one who expresses himself well in any other than his own peculiar medium. Amateur is a term of dread often applied to such men, and they are very apt to be amateur artists or amateur writers, perhaps both. It is consoling to think that all the words written and spoken about art have never yet influenced creative artists to any discernible extent. Their inspiration or their stimulus must come from within, and, after the preliminary technical progress over the well-trod paths of their artistic forefathers, which progress no great artist has ever yet evaded or avoided, their further advancement is always by empirical and not by logical processes; not logical except in an artistic sense, for logic in art, although very real, is not reducible to words until after it has already become an accomplished fact through empirical or instinctive practice.

The opera is just now the largest figure on our musical horizon, and opera, always responsive to the latest fashion, has undergone very important typical changes of late years. "Salome," by Richard Strauss, for instance, is more an extended symphonic poem than opera in the older sense. It is as if scenery, words and action had been added to the musical resources of such a work as Strauss's "Zarathustra." It is only about twice as long as "Zarathustra." Strauss's "Salome" and Debussy's "Pelléas and Mélisande" are typical modern musical achievements. In spite of the suavity and popularity of Italian operas of our time and of the operatic traditions of the Italians as a nation, they do not appear to have the importance of the German and French works just mentioned. These two men seem just now the most active forces in our musical life, and it may throw light upon the music of our own time to compare the two operas with each other. Not with other classic or modern works of the same nature; from such they differ too widely for a comparison to be useful. Old-fashioned people seek in opera a union of speech and song, and each of these two composers has renounced the latter definitely. No human voice gives forth any musically interesting phase in "Pelléas and Mélisande." In "Salome" the voices when used melodically (which is seldom) are treated like in-



struments, and it is no exaggeration to say that song is relegated entirely to the orchestra. The voices declaim, the orchestra sings. Each opera is a natural continuation of its composer's previous work. Each is an independent growth. Neither composer has influenced the other to a discernible extent. Yet it seems impossible to find any notable work of our own day which does not show the influence of one or the other of these two men.

"Salome" is in one act and lasts one hour and a half; "Pelléas and Mélisande" is in five acts and takes three hours more or less. The difference in time is largely due to the underlying play which determines the form and length of each opera. It may be granted that each of these two works reflects conscientiously the spirit of the underlying text. The shadowy, wistful people of Maeterlinck's drama are faithfully portrayed in the uncertain keyless music of Debussy, as are the outrageous people of Wilde's play in the extravagant, vociferous music of Strauss. "Pelléas and Mélisande" as a play is perhaps the extreme of mystic symbolism. It may mean anything, everything or nothing when reduced to its simplest terms in every-day speech. The motive of the play "Salome" is frankly an attempt to shock Herod—as tough a sinner as ever was drawn. The object is attained, and it is small wonder the audience is moved. There seems to be throughout Debussy's work, to speak pathologically, a preponderance of white blood corpuscles. In our day and generation we want red blood and plenty of it, and we find it in "Salome," a whole cistern spattered with it. At its first performance in New York so much got on the stage that ladies had to be led out and revived.

There is a great difference in the matter of pure noise. Throughout the whole of "Pelléas and Mélisande" one feels that the orchestra has its mouth stuffed with cotton-wool lest it should really make a noise. Most people want a healthy bellow from time to time to show that the orchestra is alive. And in "Salome" we have an orchestra with its lid entirely removed. The hazy, indeterminate, wistful vagueness which is so much admired in Maeterlinck's poem some people resent in the music which is too much like an Æolian harp, too purely decorative, too truly subordinate. The orchestra never gets up and takes hold of the situation as it often so frankly does in Strauss's "Salome." "Pelléas" is a new sensation, perhaps a new art,

but it is a little like looking at the stage through colored glass. Undoubtedly the play is the main thing.

The musical vocabulary of the two men differs immensely. Many admirers of the modern French school think Strauss's music vulgar because it really has tunes and because you can almost always tell what key it is in. In the French music the continual evasion of everything we consider obvious becomes monotonous and furiously unimportant after an hour or two. One longs in vain for a tonal point of departure, for some drawing, but there is nothing but color. The play in its form and vocabulary is the exact opposite of the music. Points of departure are not lacking in its construction, and the language is marvellously simple and direct.

There is now the matter of tonality to be discussed. The six-tone scale, which Debussy loves and uses so much, divides the octave into six equal parts. The augmented triad, which he uses perhaps more than any other, divides the octave into three equal parts. Both devices constitute a definite negation of tonality or the key sense. It may be that our grandchildren will not want tonality in our sense, and again it may well be that they will prize it more highly than we do. It is hard to imagine what can take its place; certainly there is no substitute for it in music, for the essence of musical form consists chiefly in a departure from and return to a clearly expressed tonality. A substitute for tonality outside of music would seem a hopeless abandonment of nearly all that makes the music of Beethoven, Bach and Wagner great to us. But to compare Strauss and Debussy. Other men might be found, but these two are most influential and both are typical. Each composer has a rich, individual, personal melodic and harmonic vocabulary; each offers new and satisfying rhythmic discoveries; each shows us a wealth of new and beautiful color. The differences in melody lie in the greater directness of Strauss's work. His tunes are sometimes garish in their baldness and simplicity. This is never true of Debussy, to whom a plain tune like the principal dance tune in "Salome" would seem utterly common and hateful. Polyphony is regarded as the highest, the ultimate development of melody. There seems to be infinitely more polyphonic and rhythmic vitality in Strauss's work than in that of Debussy.

Harmony has become an attribute of melody, and our har-

monic sense—a recent growth—furnishes the only means we have of definitely localizing formal portions of musical structure. Total absence of form is inconceivable in music, and form implies inevitably some degree of formality. This element is always clearly present in Strauss and always purposely absent in Debussy, who steadfastly avoids the indicative mood and confines himself apparently to the subjunctive. At great climaxes Strauss ordinarily seeks a simple triad, Debussy some more than usually obscure and refined dissonance. The harmonic element in Strauss is, perhaps, less refined, but less subtle. In Debussy it is less direct and less beautiful, but quite distinctly less obvious, if less varied.

That Strauss may be a positive and Debussy a negative force in music, the one greatest in what he does, the other in what he avoids, may invite the warmest kind of dissent. After all, we cannot get on without the common things of daily life, and, admitting his occasional lapses into the commonplace, or sometimes even lower, Strauss is the most consummate master of musical expression the world ever has seen; not the greatest composer, but the one most fully able to realize in sound his mental musical conceptions. To repeat, no musician was ever so well equipped to give to the world his musical creations, and yet since he was a very young man he has produced no pure music, nothing without an extra musical foundation; and he admits frankly that he does not intend to, although many of his friends and admirers hope still that he will.

Are we, therefore, to believe that music must be pinned down ever more henceforth to its illustrative function? One prefers to think that our living composers are unconsciously intoxicated by the luxuriance and wealth of new and beautiful musical resources which have only recently been placed at their command. That the new riches on every side tempt them to concrete rather than abstract utterance, it may be that in the future the highest flights of composers will be, as they have been in the past, into those ideal, impersonal, ethereal regions where only imagination impels, informs and creates. Illustrative music always has one foot firmly fixed on earth; how, then, can it rise to the heavens? Although it is not yet with us, the vision will come in the fulness of time; and when it does the whole world will know and follow it.

HORATIO PARKER.